

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION MONITOR - WEST AFRICA

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Executive Summary

This report provides an overview of the freedom of expression situation in West Africa in the second quarter of 2025 (April – June). Despite the critical role press freedom and freedom of expression play in consolidating democratic gains and fostering accountable governance and development, state and non-state actors violate the right to free expression and media freedom with impunity. The violations documented during the period spanned a wide range of abuses. Journalists and dissenting voices were harassed and intimidated through arrests and detentions, physical assault, threats and interrogations. On their part, media outlets faced suspensions and regulatory sanctions, often for content deemed critical of government authorities. Activists and opposition figures were also targeted, with some arrested or forced into exile for expressing views considered unfavourable to those in power. While the nature of the violations varied, the intent was often the same: to control public discourse and suppress critical and/or dissenting voices.

State actors, particularly state security agencies and media regulatory bodies, were found to be the main perpetrators of abuses against journalists, media outlets, activists, and dissenting voices. The relatively prevalent involvement of state actors in freedom of expression abuses highlights the institutional nature of repression in many countries across the region, where journalists, activists and critical voices are treated as enemies. Some political actors and other non-state actors also contributed to the intimidation of media practitioners and civic actors through threats and physical attacks.

Unfortunately, many of the reported attacks went un-investigated with most of the perpetrators walking away unpunished. A few of the violations, however, received some redress. Five violations cited during the quarter under review and three cited in the first quarter of 2025 were redressed. The Supreme Court of Senegal overturned a media suspension order, some journalists and activists were released from detention, and some media suspensions were reversed by media regulatory bodies.

The report ends with a set of recommendations from the Media Foundation for West Africa to major stakeholders in the region, such as governments, state security agencies and institutions, the media and regional and continental bodies such as the ECOWAS and the African Union. The recommendations call on these stakeholders to create an enabling environment that will ensure that journalists, media organisations, activists, dissidents and other civic actors can operate and express themselves without fear of reprisal.

Introduction



Freedom of expression is a cornerstone of democracy and development. In West Africa, it remains a fundamental right enshrined in national constitutions and protected under key international instruments such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These legal guarantees have, over the years, enabled vibrant media ecosystems and empowered citizens across the region to engage in public discourse, hold leaders accountable, and defend their rights.

West Africa is often celebrated as one of the most democratically progressive regions on the continent, with an active and critical press, and a history of peaceful transitions of power. However, in recent years, the civic space has been shrinking. Authoritarian tendencies have grown even within democratic systems, while military juntas in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Niger have further exacerbated the repression of dissent. In both democratic and military-led states, journalists, media outlets, civil society actors (including environmental activists), and ordinary citizens face increasing hostility from those in power.

As a contribution to fighting back the repression and promoting a more open and a freer civic space, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) monitors and tracks violations against expression and other developments that impact expression across West Africa. Through its in-country correspondents and partner organisations, the MFWA conducts daily monitoring of freedom of expression (FOE) developments, and gathers evidence to inform advocacy for redress and progressive policy interventions. Each reported FOE violation is published as a freedom of expression Alert on www.mfwa.org, capturing timely and verified details about incidents affecting the

media, activists, and citizens. The alerts are synthesised into quarterly reports known as The Freedom of Expression Monitor (The Monitor). The Monitor provides a regional overview, identify trends, profile victims and perpetrators, and spotlight both setbacks and moments of progress.

This edition of the Freedom of Expression Monitor covers the second quarter of 2025 (April to June). It presents an analysis of FOE violations reported across West Africa, the perpetrators involved, and the victims of the violations. It also highlights redress actions recorded, the challenge of impunity, and other FOE developments observed. Through this report, the MFWA aims to promote accountability, inform policy advocacy, and contribute to the ongoing efforts to safeguard and expand the civic space in West Africa.

Methodology

This report is compiled using data gathered from the Media Foundation for West Africa's (MFWA) daily monitoring of freedom of expression (FOE) developments across the West Africa region. The monitoring process is carried out by MFWA's country-based correspondents and partner organisations in the various ECOWAS Member States and Mauritania.

To ensure a comprehensive and reliable dataset, the monitoring draws from multiple sources. These include firsthand reports from MFWA's national correspondents, verified media accounts, and information shared by local and international human rights organisations working in the region. When validated, the reported incidents are published on the MFWA website as freedom of expression Alerts. The Alerts provide detailed and timely documentation of violations, including information on the nature of the incident, the identity of the victims and perpetrators, and any follow-up or redress actions taken.

The Freedom of Expression Monitor is a quarterly publication that compiles and analyses all Alerts issued during the reporting period. Beyond cataloguing violations, The Monitor identifies emerging trends, thematic patterns, and country-specific developments that help stakeholders better understand the freedom of expression dynamics in the region.

The Monitor also highlights significant developments that affect media freedom and civic space, including legal reforms, court rulings, policy interventions, or advocacy actions. These supplementary insights provide important context for understanding the broader FOE environment and the challenges or opportunities for progress.

Thus, The Monitor serves as an advocacy tool aimed at promoting press freedom and freedom of expression, defending civil liberties (both online and offline), and ensuring that violations do not go unnoticed or unchallenged. It is intended to inform efforts by actors (civil society, policymakers, international bodies, academics, etc.) that are aimed at creating a more open, free and safe environment for expression to foster good governance in West Africa.

This edition of The Monitor covers findings of the daily monitoring carried out throughout the second quarter of 2025.

Findings

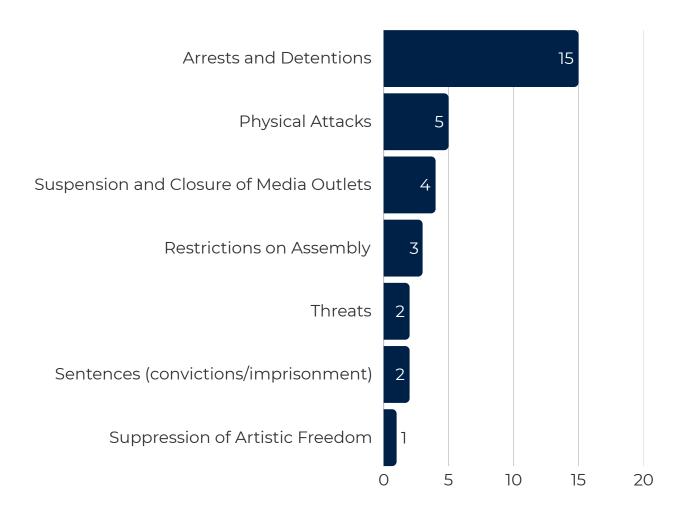


The monitoring of freedom of expression developments in West Africa from April to June 2025 revealed a range of violations perpetrated against journalists, media outlets, activists, and other members of the public. These incidents included arrests and detention, physical assaults, media suspensions and threats, among others. The violations targeted individuals and organisations engaged in critical reporting, activism, or protest. While the overall climate remained hostile, there were also instances of redress, including the release of detained persons and the lifting of media bans. The findings reflect both ongoing threats and the resilience of different actors who continue to use expression to highlight and report on developments (positive and negative) in society.

Incidents of FOE Violations

During the period under review, a total of 33 violations against the right to freedom of expression (FOE) were recorded across the region. The 33 incidents were made up of eight categories of violations. Arrests and detentions which emerged as the most dominant violation, accounted for 15 incidents (44%). The other violations cited includes physical attacks (including the destruction of equipment and deletion of footage); suspension and closure of media outlets; restrictions on assembly; threats, sentences and suppression of artistic freedom. Figure 1 below presents statistics of the incidents and categories of violations recorded.

Figure 1: Frequency and category of violations recorded



The incidents of physical attacks as captured in Figure 1 above involved four incidents in which journalists were physically attacked, an incident of confiscation of equipment and phone, and another of deletion of the footage taken by a journalist. Summaries of the specific incidents of freedom of expression abuses can be found <a href="https://example.com/here-nc/en/aparts-nc/en

Countries and Incidents of Violations

The 33 violations recorded during the second quarter of 2025 occurred across 12 countries. Togo recorded the highest incidents of violations made up of media suspensions, physical attacks and silencing of protestors – an indication of a systemic clampdown on expression. In Table 1 below, the frequency of violations recorded in each of the 12 countries is presented. The table also features the different categories of violations recorded in each country.

Table 1: Countries and Types of Violations

Types of Violations								
<u>Country</u>	Arrests & Detent ions	Physical Attacks / Destructi on	Media Suspensi on / Closure	Assem bly (Ban on Assem bly)	Senten ce	Threat	Suppres sion of Artistic Freedo ms	Total
Benin	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Ghana	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	2
Guinea	2	2	1	-	-	-	-	5
Ivory Coast	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Liberia	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Mali	3	-	1	1	-	-	-	5
Mauritania	2	-	-	-	1	-	-	3
Niger	3	-	-	-	-	1	-	3
Nigeria	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
Senegal	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
Sierra Leone	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Togo	2	2	1	2	-	-	-	7
Total	15	6	4	3	2	2	1	33

Perpetrators of Violations

The 33 incidents of FOE violations recorded were carried out by six categories of perpetrators. State actors were culpable for majority of the violations.

State security agents were the main culprits who carried out the arrests and detentions; physical attacks; destruction of equipment and deletion of footage. They accounted for 21 (62%) out of the 33 incidents – an indication of the central role of security institutions in suppressing press freedom and civic expression across the region. Media regulators, on their part, were responsible for the suspension of media outlets; and even though press offenses have been decriminalised in Benin and Mauritania, there were criminal charges and imprisonment sentences by courts in both countries. Other state actors and non-state actors were responsible for the other violations cited.

Table 2 below presents disaggregated statistics of the categories of state and non-state actors responsible for the violations cited in each country.

Figure 2: Percentage distribution of the violations per type of perpetrators

	Perpetrators							
Country	Media Regulat or	Court	State Security	Political/ Party Official	State Official	Armed Men	Total	
Benin	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	
Burkina Faso	-	-	-	-		-	-	
Cape Verde	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
The Gambia	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Ghana	-	-	1	2	-	-	3	
Guinea	3	-	-	-	-	1	4	
Guinea-Bissau	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	

	Types of Violations							
<u>Country</u>	Media Regulat or	Court	State Security	Political/ Party Official	State Official	Armed Men	Total	
Ivory Coast	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	
Liberia	-	-	1	-	-	1	1	
Mali	1	-	3	-	1	-	5	
Mauritania	-	1	2	-	-	1	3	
Niger	-	-	3	-	-	-	3	
Nigeria	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	
Senegal	-	-	3	-	-	-	3	
Sierra Leone	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	
Togo	1	-	6	-	-	-	7	
Total	6	2	21	2	1	1	33	

This distribution of the perpetrators of the 33 violations, as presented in Table 2 above, reflects the continuous pattern of state-led suppression of critical voices, with security institutions and media regulators playing significant roles in curtailing press freedom and civic expression.

Victims of Violations

Thirty-five (33) journalists, media outlets, activists and dissidents were directly affected by the violations cited. However, although many protestors were directly attacked during the June 5-6 and June 22-28, 2025 protests in Togo for expressing their concerns, the only victims accounted for in this report are those cited in Media Foundation for West Africa's (MFWA's) reports – a total of 92 victims, made up of the 25 detained from the June 5-6 protests, the 60 arrested and the seven killed during the June 26-28 protests. Altogether, the violations cited impacted victims across 12 countries in West Africa, a reflection of the widespread nature of freedom of expression abuses in the region.

Table 3: Victims of Violations recorded

Victims							
<u>Country</u>	Journalist s	Media outlets	Activists	Associatio ns	Dissident s	Protestor s	Total
Benin	1						1
Ghana	2	1					3
Guinea	1	3	1				6
lvory Coast			1				1
Liberia		1					1
Mali	3	1		1			5
Mauritan ia			2		1		3
Niger	4				2		6
Nigeria					1		1
Senegal	2				1		3
Sierra Leone	1						1
Togo	2	2			1	92	97
Total	16	8	4	1	6	92	127

Redress of Violations

Following calls for reparation from the Alerts and reports issued about freedom of expression abuses in the region by the MFWA and other organisations, the second quarter of 2025 recorded seven redress actions. Three of the reparative actions were in

response to violations recorded during the first quarter of 2025, while the remaining five were in response to abuses recorded in the second quarter. Although not all the six redress actions responded to violations cited in the second quarter, the record of six reparative actions within a quarter is notable as freedom of expression violations often go unaddressed. In fact, within a space of two days (May 20-21, 2025), media regulatory bodies in three countries had taken decisions to reverse earlier suspension directives. Excerpts of the specific redress actions recorded in the second quarter of 2025 are presented below.

On May 20, 2025, Benin's Haute Autorité de l'Audiovisuel et de la Communication <u>lifted the sanctions</u> imposed on the newspaper, Le Patriote, and the online news platform, Benin Web TV. The two media outlets were suspended on January 21, 2025 and March 12, 2025 respectively. A day after (May 21, 2025), in Guinea, the country's High Authority for Communication <u>lifted a three-month suspension</u> imposed on journalist Toumany Camara and his news website, Presse Investigation. On the same date, May 21, 2025, the Malian media regulator, the High Authority for Communication (HAC), <u>lifted a six-month suspension</u> imposed on Joliba TV. The media outlet was suspended in November 2024 by the HAC for a commentary by Issa Kaou N'Djim which questioned the official account of an attempted coup in Burkina Faso – a question the regulator considered to be damaging to the government's image.

Also in Mali, an activist and a journalist were released from detention. Activist Aliou Badra Sacko, who was abducted on March 14, 2025 in Bamako, was released on May 24, 2025. He was in detention for more than two months before his release. His abduction followed his denunciation of new taxes on mobile financial services in Mali. Malian journalist Alfousseini Togo, who was arrested on 9 April 2025 for 'undermining the credibility of the state' and 'defamation' following a critical article about the Minister of Justice, was provisionally released on bail on 12 May, 2025. He however remains under prosecution despite calls from press freedom organisations for the charges to be dropped.

Smile FM, a community radio station in Zwedru, Grand Gedeh County, southeastern Liberia, resumed operations after a <u>successful mediation</u> led by the Press Union of Liberia (PUL) in collaboration with the Association of Liberia Community Radio (ALICOR) on May 18 to 19, 2025. The station had been forcibly shut down on May 5, 2025, amid violent clashes between rival groups of Grand Gedeh citizens divided over two competing boards and station managers, each claiming legitimate control and editorial authority over the radio station, based on two separate constitutions.

In Niger, Massaouda Jaharou, one of three Sahara FM reporters who were arrested on May 9, 2025, was granted provisional release by a decision of the Niamey Military Court on June 13, 2025. As part of the provisional release conditions, Jaharou was to make herself available to the judiciary, as legal proceedings were still ongoing.

In June, 2025, Senegal's Supreme Court <u>overturned the Ministry of Communication's suspension</u> of the online news outlet, Public SN, ruling in favor of its director, Aissatou Diop Fall, who had challenged the April 22, 2025 order that halted all its activities. The suspension was part of a broader suspension by Minister Alioune Sall, that targeted over 381 media outlets deemed non-compliant with the country's press code. The Court's decision did not only restore operations of Public SN, but indirectly cast doubt on the credibility of the commission that conducted the media compliance review. The ruling also offers hope to other affected outlets.

While these redress outcomes are commendable, they remain few and far between. In most cases, perpetrators of violations, especially state security agents and public officials, act with impunity. The lack of systematic sanctions or follow-up investigations into abuses against expression continues to embolden violators and undermine public confidence in the rule of law. To deter state and non-state actors from persistent attacks and boost public confidence in the rule of law, there is need for prompt investigations into all reported violations, prosecution of perpetrators, and the strengthening of legal and institutional frameworks to safeguard the right to expression across West Africa.

Other Developments



In addition to the recorded violations, a number of issues were observed during the monitoring period which are significant for the broader freedom of expression and media landscape in the region. These included issues around Bills, mis/disinformation, dissolution of associations, and suspension of media outlets, among others.

In Sierra Leone, civil society groups and media stakeholders raised serious concerns about some provisions in Sierra Leone's Counter-Terrorism Bill. The problematic provisions were considered vaguely defined with broad language which could be weaponised to target dissenting voices and criminalise peaceful protest or online criticism. Left unrevised, the Bill, if passed into law, could become a great threat to activism, expression and participation in governance processes in Sierra Leone.

While media stakeholders and civic actors were reeling over Sierra Leone's Anti-Terrorism Bill, Ghana's Minister of Communications, Digitisation Technology and Innovation announced his government's intention to introduce a Bill to address deliberate spread of misinformation and disinformation. Although there were divided reactions from civic actors and the general public, freedom of expression advocates, including the Media Foundation for West Africa, called for stakeholder engagements and a transparent approach throughout the process to ensure that the Bill, when developed, will align with constitutionally guaranteed rights and freedoms, especially, the right to expression, opinion, information, privacy and assembly; and international conventions and treaties.

While discourses about the planned Bill were ongoing, two individuals were invited for interrogation over statements made that were considered as publication of false news. Journalist Gordon Asare-Bediako was detained and questioned by Ghana's Office of the Special Prosecutor (OSP) following corruption accusations he made against the Special Prosecutor. He refused to reveal his sources during interrogation. He was charged with false publication and false communication, and was only let to go upon a bail set at GH¢5 million (USD 323,799.17). In another incident, a former parliamentary aspirant, popularly known as Adenta Kumi, was arrested and charged with publishing false news following allegations he made about some judges adjudicating the case on the removal of Ghana's Chief Justice at the time.

Also in Ghana, a journalist, Agbenyegah was questioned over leaked National Security documents. His interrogation drew criticism from the Private Newspapers and Online News Publishers Association of Ghana (PRINPAG) as they described the interrogation as an attempt to intimidate journalists and pressure them into revealing sources. PRINPAG urged anyone with media complaints to instead go to the National Media Commission.

The civic space in Mali shrank further with two notable developments. First, Mali's transitional authorities continued their crackdown on opposition and civil society with the dissolution of political parties and associations, a move that further undermines

democratic participation and expression. Second, chills went through the media landscape and civic communities when journalists Guézouma Sanogo, Boukari Ouoba, and Luc Pagbelguem, who went missing on March 24, 2025, reappeared on April 2 2025 in a viral video wearing military uniforms. Their reappearance in the video with military outfit raised concerns, with many fearing they may have been forcibly conscripted by the ruling junta amid an intensifying crackdown on the press and critical voices. These two significant developments have the potential to force many journalists into self-censorship and clamp down on the activities of civic actors in the country.

Also in Mali, the junta's reallocation of audiovisual frequencies was questioned by the Maison de la Presse du Mali, which brings together several media organisations. The Maison de la Press denounced the lack of transparency in the junta's reallocation of audiovisual frequencies noting that the process took place without consultation with the media concerned, resulting in decisions deemed unsuitable for their operations. The organisation also criticised the fact that essential criteria, such as allocation areas, eligible media types and the number of frequencies available per locality, were only communicated when the results were published, calling into question the credibility of the process.

In Senegal, the media landscape was overhaled by the suspension of 381 media outlets deemed non-compliant with the national press code. The suspensions followed an evaluation by a new regulatory commission. With 381 outlets suspended, only 258 of the 639 outlets reviewed were found compliant. Although there is a need to sanitise the media landscape and ensure high ethical standards and professionalism, there are concerns about the transparency, objectivity and thoroughness with which the process was carried to assure the media fraternity that the affected outlets were not being witch-hunted. The concerns have become even more pertinent following Senegal's Supreme Court's ruling that overturned the suspension of the online news outlet, Public SN, one of the 381 suspended media outlets.

During the June 2025 protests in Togo, the government imposed widespread internet disruptions. Social media platforms – including Facebook, Signal, Telegram, YouTube, and DuckDuckGo – became largely inaccessible, forcing citizens to use VPNs to communicate and access information. Civil society groups, including the League of Consumers of Togo and Internet Society (Togo Chapter), condemned the shutdown as a deliberate attempt to suppress public discourse.

The developments highlighted above, in addition to the incidents of attacks reported above, are the issues that define and shape the regional climate within which press freedom and freedom of expression operate in West Africa.

Conclusion and Recommendations



The findings of the daily monitoring of the freedom of expression situation in West Africa in the second quarter of 2025 show that state and non-state actors continue to use arrests and detentions, physical attacks, threats and other suppressive acts to push journalists, activists, dissidents and other civic actors into self-censorship. The attribution of 85 percent of the violations cited to state actors portends a troubling trend of the use of state machinery to silence dissent. Faced with such a hostile environment, some journalists, activists and dissenting voices cave-in to self-censorship.

While a few redress actions were achieved through advocacy and legal intervention, these instances remain isolated. The relative pervasiveness of freedom of expression violations in the region; Sierra Leone's Counter-Terrorism Bill with repressive provisions; and the stifling of political participation, especially in transitional states, further signal an erosion of democratic norms and civil liberties in West Africa. Unless deliberate actions are taken to reverse these trends, the region risks entrenching a culture of impunity, shrinking civic space, and undermining the foundational principles of open societies. To safeguard freedom of expression and promote a safer environment for journalists, media professionals, activists, and dissenting voices, concerted action is urgently needed from all relevant stakeholders across West Africa. The Media

Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), therefore, makes the following recommendations to mitigate and manage freedom of expression violations and improving the freedom of expression landscape in the region.

To Governments and State Institutions:

Governments and state institutions should cease all forms of harassment and intimidation (often executed through arbitrary arrests and detentions) of journalists and activists. They should uphold the provisions in both national constitutions and international legal obligations that guarantee press freedom and freedom of expression. In particular, we call on the government of Sierra Leone to heed the calls from media stakeholders, civil society actors and legal experts to amend the problematic provisions of the Counter-Terrorism Bill which make it susceptible to abuse free expression rights before passing it into law.

We also call on governments in the region to hold security and law enforcement agencies fully accountable for violations committed against media practitioners, civil society actors, or citizens exercising their right to free expression. Deterring punitive measures should be administered to discourage others from such acts that violate constitutionally guaranteed rights.

Law enforcement agencies should also conduct thorough investigations into all violations cited in this report and previous ones and ensure that perpetrators – particularly public officials and security officers – are held to account. Upholding justice in such cases will deter future violations and reinforce public trust in state institutions.

To Media Regulatory Bodies:

We encourage media regulators to act, at all times, with complete independence, fairness, and professionalism, free from political interferences. Regulatory processes should prioritise engagement, dialogue, and warnings before resorting to punitive measures such as suspensions or fines. Transparency in decision-making is essential to building public confidence and ensuring that regulation supports, rather than suppresses, a vibrant and responsible media environment.

To Journalists and Media Organisations:

We call on journalists and media organisations to continue to uphold the highest ethical and professional standards in their work at all times. Maintaining professionalism strengthens public trust and fortifies the media's credibility as a pillar of democracy. Media organisations should, on their part, provide legal and psychosocial support to journalists and media workers in their pursuit for justice, and support and sustain collective advocacy for media rights and freedom of expression.

To ECOWAS and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights:

We call on ECOWAS and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to strengthen their oversight mechanisms to ensure Member States comply with established human rights instruments. In particular, we call on ECOWAS and the African Union to hold governments accountable for persistent or systemic violations and executive overreach; and foster a more open and supportive environment for free expression across West Africa and the continent at large.



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